

*Life Lessons Learned Through Volleyball
& how they will be beneficial for a career in Sales*

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ramon Avila Ph.D." in a cursive script.

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Abstract

Choosing to play volleyball in college is a monumental decision. It is hard to fully understand the level of commitment without actually experiencing it, but one objective of this paper is to help illustrate that experience; specifically, how I developed skills throughout my volleyball career that will help as I enter the professional world of sales.

To the uninformed, playing volleyball in college could be viewed as nothing more than playing in games, practicing, and in some cases getting your education paid for. However, the sacrifices made for those opportunities can often times be missed. One of the largest sacrifices is time. All of the time spent preparing for and playing volleyball could have been spent doing countless other things, including working. Personally, I do not regret my commitment at all, but it is important to identify this sacrifice to truly appreciate the value of the skills I developed.

I know that most athletes are worried about going into a career without any work experience. My main objective is to prove that, for athletes, our sport is our career. Instead of going into the office, we go to the arena, and instead of preparing at a desk, we prepare in the weight room.

I believe it is vital that all athletes know he or she can utilize their experience through athletics in the place of work experience.

Acknowledgments

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I would like to thank all of the coaches and teammates I have had throughout my volleyball career. All of them helped contribute in their own specific way to the life lessons I learned that will help me to achieve success in my future.

I would like to thank my loving parents and boyfriend for not only encouraging me to pursue this project, but more importantly to stick with volleyball when I wanted nothing more than to quit.



Life Lessons Learned Through Volleyball

*& how they will be beneficial
for a career in Sales*

By: Lauren Schlaker

Dedication

To my best friend, *William*;
I would be lost without his love and support.

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Life Lessons

Character

Character is emphasized in volleyball through participation. When you are a collegiate athlete, you are constantly in the limelight. Participation in college athletics forces you to make the right choices; otherwise you will face harsh consequences. Character is also built through athletics by the stress placed on sportsmanship. In volleyball we were always taught to treat our competitors with respect. Before every match we shook the hands of each player on the opposing team and wished them luck. Likewise, after each match, no matter the outcome, we shook their hands and told them “good game.”

This sportsmanship can be applied to the character a salesperson should demonstrate. When most people think of salespeople, they think of the mischievous and cunning used car salesmen; however, that is not how a successful salesperson should want to be perceived. As a salesperson, you will garner more credibility with your buyer if you treat your competition with respect. Bashing your competition’s products will only put you on the same level as the infamous used car salesmen. Instead, treat your competition with respect so that your buyers will respect you. A salesperson that has good character will have more credibility in the eyes of his or her clients.

Another way that good character will benefit a salesperson is by helping him or her overcome the struggle with ethics. Most situations that salespeople encounter will lead him or her to a decision they have to make where the outcome

will either be ethical or unethical. A person with good character is less likely to make the unethical decisions, which will allow him or her to stay credible in the professional world.

Coachable

One of the hardest things in playing volleyball is communicating with your coach. Throughout the many years I've played volleyball, I had over fifteen different coaches, each coach with their own unique coaching style. The easiest coaches to communicate with were the ones who were upfront and honest, and would tell me exactly how he or she felt. Contrarily, I also had coaches who would never provide feedback at all. No matter how the criticism was (or wasn't) delivered, I had to learn how to use it to make myself a better player. This task is by no means easy, and it took countless years to master. The biggest thing I learned was that no matter how much you may disagree, the coach is always right. The bottom line is, if you don't take their advice seriously, you will never see the court.

Being coachable doesn't only apply to taking criticism from a coach. I honestly think that the best advice comes from teammates, not coaches, but this is always the hardest criticism to handle. No athlete likes to be told by a teammate what to do, but the best athletes are able to swallow their pride and take other player's criticism as advice rather than an insult.

Being coachable in sports will directly correlate to the professional world. In the professional world, you will encounter many different bosses, just as you will throughout athletics. Whether you report to one boss or several, taking the advice of those individuals is key. First of all, taking the advice of another shows respect;

there is obviously a reason that managers are managers, they are doing something correct, which means their advice holds value. When they know that their advice is appreciated, followed, and taken seriously, they will show more respect for that individual. No manager likes the overconfident newcomer that has the “I can do it all myself” attitude. Volleyball certainly has no room for that type of attitude, and neither does the professional world.

Commitment

Throughout life, we all learn that it is hard to stay committed to something, especially for a long period of time. Most of the girls on my team have been playing volleyball since they were in elementary school. That adds up to over twelve years of being on a competitive volleyball team, twelve years of volleyball practice (three to five times a week), twelve years of strength training, and twelve years of tournaments and showcases. By the time most athletes who play a year-round sport get to their last season of high school, he or she is burnt out. I have witnessed one of the greatest players in my club turn down offers from numerous top colleges because she did not enjoy playing anymore.

After sticking with something for so long, no matter how committed an athlete may be, there are always going to be those mornings that he or she doesn't want to wake up for practice. In college sports, it is your job to attend practice, so as an athlete, we constantly push ourselves to work through those mornings, and perform despite low motivation. If an athlete cannot motivate themselves to perform, he or she will never have success in their sport.

In sales this same rule applies. One of the most frequently missed factors in sales is service. Service after a sale is just as important, if not more important, than the cultivation before the sale. This is because repeat business is the lifeline of an organization. Although after sales servicing can be tedious (like the countless practices athletes attend), it is that level of commitment that a successful sales representative demonstrates that shows his or her clients they are dedicated to helping them.

Communication

Communication plays a very significant role in volleyball. One of the first things you are taught when you begin is to “call the ball.” Calling the ball is communicating with your teammates that you are going to take the ball, so they can adjust accordingly. The importance of the simple call of “mine” not only helps a team win, but it also keeps players safe.

My assistant coach, Corey Carlin always tells the story about two players on his previous team. The girls did not communicate with each other who was getting the ball, so they both went after it and collided; the collision sent one of the girls to the hospital with a head injury.¹ This case is extreme, but there have been countless times that multiple people went after the same ball because no one communicated. This not only can cause harm to players, but usually when more than one person goes after a ball, the play is not made.

Communication is also important in volleyball to set up plays. When an attacker calls out what he or she wants to be set, the setter will then know where to

¹ Carlin, Corey (2012). Ball State University Women's Volleyball Assistant Coach.

put the ball. For a team's offense to coordinate properly, team communication needs to be clear. The biggest problem in offense occurs when an attacker fails to properly communicate to their team.

The importance of communication holds true in sales as well. Strategic and clear communication with clients during a sales call will allow a sales representative to find out exactly what the client's needs are so that he or she can sell their product in a way that pertains to that particular client.

Communication is also important between departments of a company. To relate this theory directly to volleyball, each department is a different position on the court. Without each position collectively, nothing will get accomplished. The communication between these positions/departments is crucial for success. In volleyball the players in the positions have to work together to successfully attack the ball, and in a company, the departments have to work together to produce and sell their product. Communication between the sales department and other departments is especially important. As a sales representative, communication with the production department will help him or her to better understand the aspects of the product so they can answer questions his or her clients may have. A representative can also communicate with the production department about concerns or suggestions their clients have about a product that may be beneficial for the company to explore.

Sales is the connection between a company and its clients, it is vital for the sales department to efficiently communicate with the other departments in a company so that they have a clear understanding of his or her product and clients.

Competitiveness

Competitiveness is not necessarily a trait learned through volleyball, but it is enhanced through the numerous exposures to competition in games and practices. A competitive nature is a prerequisite for playing sports, especially at the collegiate level. Personally, I do not think there is any better way to prove competitiveness than by playing a sport. People with a competitive nature have the desire to win, and the desire to win is an attribute that is extremely desirable in the world of sales.

An employer that is well-known for hiring former college athletes is Enterprise Rental Car. Marie Artim, Vice President of Talent Acquisition at Enterprise said “We see the skills that student athletes gain from their experience and know the value he or she can bring to our business.”² Enterprise is not shy about making it known they want competitive individuals. I spoke with Enterprise employee Epsilon Williams who also happens to be a former college football player. He shared, “One of the reasons I got in the door at Enterprise was the fact that they knew I played football and was a competitive individual. The manager that I first interviewed with told me he only hires former athletes because he knows what he is getting (with a former athlete).”³

Competitiveness can drive results, and in a sales organization results are often the biggest measuring stick for success. This could be the reason that a large number of sales firms make their sales team’s numbers common knowledge. These organizations want each rep to see how he or she is doing individually and to compare it to others in their district, region, and country. Federated Insurance

² Marie Artim (2012). Vice President of Talent Acquisition at Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

³ Williams, Epsilon (2012). Management Trainee at Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

marketing representative, Tanner Justice, shared with me that all individuals' sales numbers are released for company review once a month. He added, having access to his co-workers' sale numbers helps to drive the competitive nature of the company.⁴

Confidence

I will never forget the day that my assistant coach, Kelli Miller, told our team that we had to “carry ourselves with swagger.”⁵ During the specific talk, my team was being scolded for not showing enough emotion during the game. Kelli argued walking into a game with confidence will automatically give you an edge over your competition. In sports, confidence is intimidating to an opponent. A player without confidence will be seen as a target to their opponent. During a volleyball game, you always want to go after the person who looks the most insecure, whether you are serving or attacking at them.

Another coach once told me that “even if you make a mistake, make it at 100 percent.” To me, this advice translates to “don’t hesitate.” Volleyball is such a fast-paced game that there is virtually no time for hesitation. I’ve learned that game-saving plays are not made by players that are hesitant to make the first move to the ball.

Sean McCann, PhD, director of Sports Psychology Services at the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, determined a number of mental skills crucial to sports success. He stated that confidence is key to good

⁴ Justice, Tanner (2012). Marketing Representative at Federated Mutual Insurance Company.

⁵ Miller, Kelli (2012). Ball State University Women’s Volleyball Assistant Coach.

performance, specifically for the serve receiver in volleyball. In the book, *Volleyball Skills and Drills*, McCann stated, “Confidence translates into the ability to trust one’s own skills, thus invoking the ability to perform automatically, without hesitation or second thoughts.”⁶

This same kind of mentality is also key to success in sales. When bringing a proposal into a buyer, it is vital to present it with confidence. If you don’t have confidence in presenting your work, then the buyer won’t have confidence in you or your product. A confident sales representative can control the sales call if he or she doesn’t hesitate to overcome the buyer’s objections. Any hesitation throughout your proposal will ultimately lower your credibility with the buyer.

Decision Making

Decision making is the one of the broadest skillsets because it can encompass many different situations. Playing volleyball taught me how to make the best decisions on and off the court. The fast-paced nature of volleyball requires that decisions are made in milliseconds. This taught me to quickly and effectively make a decision without hesitation. For example, when I am about to pass a ball, there are so many factors that I take into account. Before I touch the ball I have to decide where, when, and how to hit the ball. The decision of where to place the ball is usually made before I even step onto the court, through our scouting reports. Overall, there are numerous factors that I seamlessly balance before taking action. I

⁶ McCann, Sean (2006). Director of Sports Psychology Services at the United States Olympic Training Center.

would argue that without volleyball I would not be as efficient and effective at making the right decisions.

Off the court decision making is just as important as it is during a game. Volleyball has further cemented my ethics as a person and helped me make the right decisions off the court.

In sales, effective decision making can mean the difference between a sale and no sale. As I mentioned, decision making is so broad that it ties into every other skill listed throughout this paper, and really is a compliment to them all. From a very high level, most sales situations can come down to one decision from the buyer: yes or no. A successful sales career is determined by the ability to make correct decisions that positively influence the buyer.

In speaking with rookie marketing representative, Mike Love, I learned of his decision making process. Mike shared:

“My decision making starts as soon as I wake up, from deciding my route for sales calls for the day, to what information I want to highlight when I am proposing. One of my favorite parts, regarding decision making, are the impromptu decisions I am forced to make during the day. For example, sometimes during proposals I get questions that I do not know the answer to, and the decision of how I handle my response is critical, I love the pressure.”⁷

These impromptu decisions in sales are just like the decisions made in passing a volleyball. You have to take into account every aspect of the situation so that you can efficiently and effectively decide your action.

⁷ Love, Mike (2012). Marketing Representative at Federated Mutual Insurance Company.

Determination

Without determination it would not have been possible for me personally to play volleyball. There are so many ups and downs in volleyball, and it is easy to get stuck on the “downs” and let the negativity consume you. I have seen firsthand how the lack of determination coupled with a negative attitude can end careers. I had a coach that always used to say, “Don’t get PLOM syndrome.” PLOM stands for Poor Little Old Me. Essentially, this coach was saying don’t feel sorry for yourself and do not focus on the negativity. This may have more to do with attitude than anything else; however, determination can be the tool to get that required attitude. There is no question that there have been times throughout my career where I have questioned if I wanted to continue playing. I can truthfully say that I relied on my determination and love for the game to continue (and I am glad I did).

In sales, determination is just as important. Sales can be very discouraging because you are going to hear “no” more than you hear “yes.” With a high level of determination, a sales representative can get past the constant rejections, and understand that hearing “no” is part of the job. In sales, the most successful representatives are able to take buyers’ rejection as a challenge and opportunity. Determined sales representatives will continue to call on that buyer even after the rejection. This determination is crucial because most sales will not happen in the first call.

Discipline

Among the great freedoms that accompany the “college life” is the ability to choose how to spend your time. Volleyball helped keep me disciplined with my schoolwork and athletics. I was always expected to be at practice on time (no matter how early in the morning it started), I had to be at every lift, game and team meeting, I had to attend class, and I had to maintain a high grade point average if I wanted to compete. I knew that if I did not do what was expected of me, there would be consequences for myself, for my teammates, or both. I did not always want to get up early and go to practice, then straight to class; but I knew if I didn’t that it would not only affect me negatively, but also my team. The accountability that comes with being a member of a team is something that enhanced my discipline.

One of the perks of having a sales job is the freedom. Many sales jobs involve the sales representative working from home or from his or her own office. A sales representative is able to set his or her own schedule, which means he or she can wake up whenever they want and make as many calls as they want. It is important to be disciplined as a salesperson because no one is going to be there to hold him or her accountable. It is necessary that he or she has the self-motivation to wake up early every morning and go out and make as many calls as possible. Essentially, salespeople can work as hard he or she wants to. With that much freedom, it becomes apparent why having discipline is essential for a sales representative to be successful.

Goal Setting

To this day, I still smile when I think about my favorite high school coach getting asked if he thought we were going to win our upcoming game; he would always pause, smile, and then look at them and say, “No, we practiced all week to lose.” To him and to us, that question was just as ridiculous as the answer that he always gave. Of course we were going to win; it was our goal. In volleyball, just as in all other sports, the ultimate goal is to win. While goals can vary significantly from team to team or from sport to sport, every team sets goals with the outcome of success in mind.

Through sports, athletes not only learn what goal setting is and how it can help achieve success, he or she also learns how to correctly set goals. Anyone who knows anything about goal setting will share that in order to have a good goal it must be a SMART goal. This acronym was taught to me in club volleyball. The following paragraphs identify the acronym SMART and explain how I personally applied these concepts to setting goals in volleyball:

Specific

As a team, we simply did not say “let’s win all the games we are ever going to play” (although we all would have liked to). Instead, we took one game at a time; whoever we were playing next was our focus, even in the offseason when we were not scheduled to play our next game for months. Before games we would also set specific goals, such as a certain number of blocks, digs, or kills we wanted to acquire by the end of the game. These smaller, more specific goals were a blueprint for our overall objective of winning.

Measurable

More than anywhere else, this concept was demonstrated in the weight room. Getting bigger, faster, or stronger is not a goal that is instilled with a “just give it your best shot” attitude. Instead, in order to get bigger, faster, or stronger, I set goals that were measured at consistent intervals. For example, to increase my vertical jump I recorded how high I jumped every time and then set a goal of what I wanted to achieve the next jump. Even if I did not reach my goal, I knew how much I missed it by and how close or far I was from achieving my goal. This concept is essential in the professional world, especially in the sales field.

Attainable and Realistic

We all know and love some of the famous Cinderella stories in the various levels of athletics, and there is no doubt that it is important to dream big; however, there can be a point in which dreaming big gets in the way of achieving other, more realistic goals. Personally, I’ve always dreamed of playing in and winning the NCAA Championship, which is certainly not impossible, but it is not necessarily realistic. Getting to the NCAA Championship requires goal setting, and I would argue that to reach the Championship, a team would need to utilize smaller, specific goals to attain their larger goals. For example, in order to get to the NCAA Championship we would need to make it to the NCAA Tournament; in order to make it to the NCAA Tournament we would most likely need to win the MAC Championship; in order to win the MAC Championship we would need to have the best record overall; in order to have the best record we would need to win a certain number of games, etc. All of

the previous goals would be considered attainable and realistic, and if achieved could lead to an unbelievable goal.

Timely

Timely goals were mostly set in the weight room. In our spring training we all set goals, each with a deadline. Without this deadline we all could have put our goals off indefinitely. Making our goals timely helped to eliminate procrastination.

Volleyball teaches this concept of goal setting, and is one of the many reasons that participating in athletics makes individuals that much more desirable as candidates for employment. With the countless years of practice at goal setting, an athlete will not have problems setting goals in a sales job.

Just as in sports, success in the professional world can be defined by a number of different criteria. In the professional world, success could be represented by reaching a quota or by getting a promotion, among other countless examples.

AJ Upton, a Marketing Representative at Federated Insurance, shared with me his experience with goal setting to reach success in his work:

“There are so many moving parts to my job that I could not function without clear goals. I have annual goals that I work towards every day that I set with my manager every year during our annual planning that help me achieve success throughout the year. To help achieve those goals I prepare a monthly planner before every month and go over it with my manager. I also have either a weekly phone call or a ride along with my manager where we set out goals for the following weeks that help me achieve the goals on the monthly

planner, which in turn help me achieve the annual goals. It is a yearlong process all tied together.”⁸

Preparation

Preparation in volleyball happens both on and off the court. The week of practices before a match, we have a specific practice plan that applies to the team we will be competing against. If our opponent is very good at blocking, we work on our blocking coverage, if our opponent is good at offense, we will work on our defense, etc. These practices before games are vital to our success as a team.

The other part of our preparation happens in the video room. The night before our game we go over a scouting report of the opposing team. These scouting reports contain information about strengths and weaknesses of specific players, as well as strengths and weaknesses of the team. These scouting reports prepare us for the game in a way that practices alone cannot. For example, all week long we can practice a certain defense; however, during the game it is physically impossible to get to every ball. The scouting reports tell us the areas we need to focus on most during the game, such as certain places that an opposing hitter likes to attack, or where the setter likes to tip the ball. Being prepared will help you to anticipate where to be on the court at certain times.

I was once told anticipation is the best skill that you can have (on and off the court) and it is also the hardest skill to develop and attain. Since it is impossible to predict the future, we rely on preparation to learn the tendencies of our competition and focus on the factors we can control. The similarities of applying this concept to

⁸ Upton, AJ (2012). Marketing Representative at Federated Mutual Insurance Company.

the professional world are vast. In speaking with Tanner Justice, he told me a story that I believed highlights the importance of strategic preparation.

Mr. Justice was preparing for a proposal with one of the top ten accounts in his territory. This was an account that was particularly volatile because of some unrelated events that occurred before Mr. Justice began cultivating the account. According to Mr. Justice, there were a large number of competitors also proposing the same account. When I asked Tanner how he prepared for it he responded, "I knew there was competition, and I knew I had some challenges to work through, but I chose to focus on the factors I could control; which happened to be the product I was selling and the reasons why I was recommending it. I also made sure that I went into my proposal ready for any objections from the buyer."⁹

By focusing on his products strengths, and preparing for all possible questions and objections, Mr. Justice was able to successfully propose the product to his buyer.

Reliability

In a sport like volleyball, where you are competing as a team rather than individually, it is important that your teammates can rely on you during competition. This is a skill that must be mastered by an athlete if he or she wants to play. An athlete's reliability is developed through his or her countless interactions with teammates any time they are competing, whether it is during practice or a game. Developing trust in your teammates does not happen overnight. You have to continually prove yourself capable in order to gain the trust of your team.

⁹ Justice, Tanner (2012). Marketing Representative at Federated Mutual Insurance Company.

In volleyball, reliability is especially imperative because you must work together to earn a point. A successful play requires an individual to pass the ball to another player who will set the ball to another player who will attack the ball. Reliability is important in determining who to pass or set the ball to. As an athlete, if you want your teammates to pass or set the ball to you, you have to gain their trust with your consistent and successful performance.

The same concept applies to a sales position. Obviously as a sales representative your main goal is to win the sale. This will never occur without first winning the trust of your buyer. Like in volleyball, this trust is built over time, and it could take you multiple interactions with a buyer before they will even let you propose to him or her. In volleyball you develop your teammates trust through your performance; and the same idea applies to sales. Marketing representative, Tanner Justice shared with me his thoughts on the importance of trust between representatives and buyers.

“When you are calling on a prospect for the first time, one of the biggest and most important challenges to overcome is building a level of mutual trust and developing a relationship. One of my clients, Tom Fulner, President of Dynamark Graphics, told me the reason he does business with me is because I am reliable. He told me he has seen so many salesmen come and go that do not deliver on what he or she promised. Tom said he knows when I tell him I will follow up next Tuesday at two in the afternoon that I will be there. More than anything else, he likes that I do

what I say I am going to do. Tom was my first sale and continues to be my favorite account and a great client.”¹⁰

Mr. Justice’s client trusts him because he proved that he was reliable. In volleyball, your teammate will only give you the ball if they trust that you will deliver the expected results. In Mr. Justice’s case, his client, Tom, allowed him to handle his insurance because he trusted that Mr. Justice would provide him with the outcome he desired.

Time Management

One of the hardest things about participating in college volleyball was learning how to manage my time wisely. Between team practices, individual practices, strength training, road trips and matches, I seldom had time left in the day for classes and schoolwork. Furthermore, our schedule forced us to miss most weekends of the fall semesters. This made it extremely hard to keep up with schoolwork. In order to be a successful student athlete, I was forced to develop excellent time management skills. By utilizing my time management skills, I was able to manage my time so that I was always able to finish my work, and in some cases, get my work done ahead of time so that I was never behind in my courses.

As a salesperson managing your time wisely can mean many different things. One way a salesperson manages his or her time is through planning their call route pattern. This is an important aspect of time management, because if planned properly, a call route pattern will save him or her time by minimizing driving time. This concept is similar to planning out a workload schedule for volleyball and

¹⁰ Justice, Tanner (2012). Marketing Representative at Federated Mutual Insurance Company.

school. If I knew I was going to miss my Friday classes, then I would plan my schedule accordingly so that I could finish my work ahead of time.

Another aspect of time management in sales is account management. In sales there are different account classifications for the size of the accounts. A sales representative must understand the differences in the classifications, and manage his or her time wisely for each account. It is important that the larger accounts are getting more attention than the smaller accounts. In volleyball, I was also taught to prioritize my schedule like a salesperson prioritizes his or her accounts. In my case, in order to be a successful student athlete, I gave most of my time to academics and athletics, and the leftover time was spent as desired.



So again, to the uninformed, I understand that many may simply read the title of this paper and surmise that it would be filled with sports quotes and how they can be metaphors for the “real world”. I hope, though, that after reading this paper those same people will better understand how much I have grown and prepared myself for a career in sales because of volleyball. These have indeed been life lessons. These are lessons not available to most students whose only education comes via a book or lecture hall. My time playing volleyball has forever shaped my character. I have learned humility and the need to be coachable in order to better myself. I also now understand what true commitment means and the benefits of teamwork, communication, preparation, and discipline. Playing volleyball has undoubtedly given me the confidence to enter into the work force with a passion and competitive spirit ready to embrace all the challenges that lie ahead. I strongly believe all of the skills I learned as a student athlete have well prepared me to enter into the industry of professional selling. It is these lessons that will undoubtedly help me to become successful as a professional salesperson.

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